

*Haide: On a Life that Feels Itself Live in Nancy and Gospodinov*  
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These conservative columnists. Why is it that, in a decidedly “liberal” or centrist newspaper like the *New York Times*, it is the conservative columnists who always seem to have their fingers closest to the pulse of the *Zeitgeist*, the issues that really seem to give a sense of where we are and where we’re going? I’m speaking first of all of David Brooks, who in a recent column, “It’s Not the Economy, Stupid” (published a few days before I write these words), speaks of a malaise deeply entrenched in the United States (though it is hardly limited to a single country) at the very moment its economy is booming. Brooks puts forth several reasons for this, among them what he calls a “crisis of connection,” and notes what he calls “an absolutely stunning trend”: “life expectancy in the United States declined for the third straight year,” which leads him to label the moment of economic buoyancy a “straight-up social catastrophe” (Brooks 2018). How, then, to understand this malaise better, in order to combat it? Brooks doesn’t really go into detail about this in the article, though he does elsewhere; here, he limits himself to several references to recent books that seek to take on this problem, before ending with a flourish: “It’s not jobs, jobs, jobs anymore. It’s relationships, relationships, relationships” (ibid.). There is plenty to criticize here, in my view, above all the idea that the task at hand is to bring social well being in line with economic well being—as though the latter were a simple given, as though a profound change in economic course were not necessary, as though the malaise were not one of the very objects of the economic growth in question. But in highlighting the decline in life expectancy, Brooks makes an interesting move: what he argues, if implicitly, is that the social catastrophe in question should not be posed as an afterthought to the economy, should in no way be thought of as a superstructure, but is rather resolutely material in its nature: the malaise of which he speaks is a question, to put it simply, of life and death.

The problem here seems resolutely “biopolitical,” since what is at stake appears to be a politics or a power that works at the very level of life—of individuals, of populations—producing a sort of living death at the very moment one would expect the opposite to happen. Yet as soon as one really begins to deal with the problem on which Brooks touches, one gets a sense of the limitations of this term: in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, who has undertaken what one might think of as a tangential but sustained engagement with what, since Foucault, has come to be known as biopolitics, one of the term’s limitations is to suggest that a “form of life” that has been captured by the biopolitical machine should aim to engineer “an elegant withdrawal” from this machine in the form of a figure that, through an act of “common auto-production or auto-creation,” would effectuate “the negation of political separation” (Nancy 2007: 95); the term suggests this because at a deeper level, it implies the possibility of anchoring meaning in its constituent components (life, politics)—the possibility of knowing what these terms mean once and for all. As Nancy puts it in a later work, what is necessary is not to oppose life to power, but rather “to think ‘existence’ rather than ‘life’ or to think ‘life’ completely otherwise,” to “think life itself on the other side of ‘life’ and politics itself on the other side of ‘politics’” (Nancy 2016: 52, my translation). To think a life-as-existence, in other words, that wouldn’t seek to locate a figure in which to fix itself, that wouldn’t be content with any already constituted meaning, but would rather be something like a pure creation, a dynamism always already underway – what he calls, in the book from which I have just cited, *fervor*.<sup>1</sup>

This fervor—a fervor of the present (but how could fervor be anything but?)—is the reason, to my mind, for Nancy’s recent injunction to read Gospodinov’s *The Physics of Sorrow*. Before turning to Nancy, however, I want to say a few words, for reasons that will become clear below, about an excellent recent article on Gospodinov by Garth Greenwell. Greenwell surmises that one of the reasons for the novel’s success in Bulgaria—“its first

printing sold out in a day, and it went on to become the country's best selling book of 2012" (Greenwell 2015), he notes—is its unique treatment of the sorrow referred to in its title. The Bulgarian here is *tuga*, and Greenwell notes that Bulgarians often take this term as defining of the national character: "As Gospodinov conceives it, the Bulgarian word *tuga* ... is, like Pamuk's *hüzün* or Nabakov's *toska*, a word for which there's no real equivalent in English" (ibid.), or any other language, one might add. Greenwell's words echo those of Gospodinov's narrator, who, in a series of passages about his young daughter, writes: "While I'm writing about the world's sorrows, Portuguese *saudade*, Turkish *hüzün*, about the Swiss illness – nostalgia . . . she comes to me, at two and a half, and suddenly snatches away my pen" (Gospodinov 2015: 177). *Tuga, toska, hüzün, saudade*: a veritable dictionary of untranslatables, which leads Greenwell to make, in a parenthesis, a paradoxical observation: "(Maybe everyone imagines their sorrow to be untranslatable; maybe they're right.)" (Greenwell 2015) In Greenwell's brilliant formulation, a paradox whose force lies precisely in its unresolvability, there is nothing specifically Bulgarian about *tuga*, just as there is nothing specifically Portuguese about *saudade*, etc.—and yet there is: the word at once conveys something that belongs to a single language or people, and to all languages and all peoples, universal precisely insofar as it is national, available to all only to the extent that it belongs solely to one. To borrow a term from Nancy, the word is resolutely singular plural,<sup>2</sup> and so it should be unsurprising that this novel that deals with a Bulgarian disposition has also attained success outside of its country, for—in Greenwell's reading—the novel is not simply "about" *tuga*, but rather—again, paradoxically—employs the latter as an antidote to malaise. Greenwell notes several strategies that have recently taken hold in Bulgaria to combat a seeming vacuum of meaning in a country taking its first steps into a globalized world: there is, on the one hand, the "retreat to an imagined past: to the nostalgic décor of socialist-themed night clubs and bars" that seek to "sell nostalgia"; on the other hand (yet the

relation is clear), there is “what Gospodinov calls the ‘kitsch’ of nationalism, the fantasies of Bulgaria’s past greatness invoked by the far-right Ataka party”; Greenwell characterizes both examples as “attempts to flee from or deny the sorrow of the present,” and here he comes to the crux of his argument about Gospodinov: insofar as nostalgia and nationalism are both attempts to flee from the sorrow of the present, resistance to them lies in “embracing that sorrow, and Georgi’s real quest in ‘The Physics of Sorrow’ is to find a way to live with sadness, to allow it to be a source of empathy and salutary hesitation—the antidote to aggressive politics and ‘market exhortations’—and not a cause of ‘savage fear.’” A way to live with sadness (a sadness without malaise), or, alternatively, sadness as a way of life: something that holds within it the elements of a form of common existence.

This leads me to Nancy’s article on Gospodinov, because it seems to me that Nancy complements Greenwell nicely in saying something at once very similar and very different. Similar, because after all Nancy, in speaking of the novel, is speaking of the same sorrow, *mélancolie*, *tuga*. Yet what immediately strikes the reader of Nancy’s article is just how “non-sad” its tone is,<sup>3</sup> beginning with the title, “Entrain bulgare” (Nancy 2015), the first word of which appears almost as untranslatable as *tuga*—the terms usually employed to translate it into English, such as spirit, enthusiasm, animation, etc., all miss something essential—until one realizes that “entrain” is also an English word, if a rare one: the *OED* defines it as “Enthusiasm, liveliness; an instance of this,” and notes that it derives from two possible French sources: the verb *entraîner*, “in its specific sense ‘to make (a person) enthusiastic,’” or the phrasal verb *être en train de*, which denotes an action that is underway. The reason one should read the novel *sans délai*, as Nancy puts it, is because it attains a kind of movement, a rhythm of the contemporary, something about it is plugged into the experience of the now: something about it is alive.

For life is the very language of Nancy's article. He begins by noting that the novel brings with it "a bundle of wonderful tidings" (Nancy 2019), but *gerbe de belles nouvelles* could also be rendered "sheaf of beautiful stories," as if the stories that comprised the novel (it is, after all, made up of sections that at times seem only loosely related) were as closely related to life as the wheat or corn brought together in a sheaf. The first of these tidings—the first stalk of which the sheaf is composed—is "the literary vitality of a country and a language perfectly poised to set the Mediterranean region in motion"; another is the narration that "manages to place the Minotaur in the midst of quantas, DNA, and *Lolita*"; yet another is the book's "bounding, agile, joyful, rich language, whose vivacity Marie Vrinat-Nikolov [the novel's French translator] is able to reproduce for us" (ibid.). Literary vitality, DNA, vivacity: all indices of life, and thus it is no wonder that Nancy, in what is perhaps the article's most telling passage, characterizes the novel as nothing less than an "event" of "literature as the phrased palpitation of life itself, as a true possibility for life—our life—to feel itself live" (ibid.). Surely the palpitation of such a life would indicate a way beyond the malaise I discussed above; what Nancy seems to locate in this novel ostensibly about sorrow is a life force beyond any dialectic of happy and sad, or melancholy and its overcoming or sublation, thus comprising (to cite the last words of the article) a "fresh air that wakes you up" (ibid.).

This sounds very much like the language of immediacy—how else to conceive of a life that feels itself live?—and this brings me to the second conservative columnist I want to discuss, Bret Stephens (also of the *Times*), who recently devoted a column to the film *Free Solo*, about Alex Honnold, an American rock climber known for scaling vertical rock faces alone and without a rope (a style of climbing to which the film's title refers). Stephens admits to writing the article in a euphoric state ("The film is a drug," he states), and the euphoria is that of life: Honnold and other free soloists defy death at every moment of their exploits, and

hence, Stephens suggests, raise the question of whether the aim of life should be excellence, rather than (as if often assumed) happiness or longevity; the film “makes life so much more vivid and significant” than usual because it bears “a kind of radical truthfulness”: Honnold is either “going to get it exactly right, or he’s going to die” (Stephens 2018). This is certainly a life that feels itself live (if only because of its close proximity to death), and while in some ways Stephens works within a classic ideological framework—that of the individual hero struggling against or showing a way out of society’s ills—he also seeks to combat the “deadening” happiness that to my mind is one of the main productions of contemporary power. But the main difference between the life Stephens locates in the film, and the one Nancy finds in *Gospodinov’s* novel, concerns immediacy: if the life that palpitates throughout *The Physics of Sorrow* is indeed immediate, what is key is that there is also a distance inherent to it; the narrator locates it, time and again, not through any aspiration to greatness, not by seeking to transcend the everyday and indeed, at times, banal qualities of life, but rather by doubling down on them—by combing the most everyday moments, the most unremarkable occurrences, everything we usually overlook, for an opening, something that doesn’t quite fit, a sort of strangeness of the banal that, in diverging ever so slightly from the common course of events, invites the reader to take part in something unprecedented, a juxtaposition of the multiple, an ephemeral gathering of elements (as though in a sheaf) that becomes an act of creation.

Near the middle of *The Physics of Sorrow*, one reads the following brief paragraph: “Come on, let’s play dust motes. You’re the daddy dust mote, and I’m the baby dust mote” (Gospodinov 2015: 177); while this is not clear from the words cited in isolation—no speaker is indicated, there are no quotation marks—the context indicates that they are spoken by the narrator’s daughter. These are the final words of the novel’s fifth chapter, and as such, I want to pose the question: how exactly does the narrator arrive here? There are many ways to

answer this question – many means of arrival, in other words. First, this is the final of several passages in which the narrator speaks of his daughter: he notes that “[f]or the eye of every newborn—rat, fly, or turtle—each time the world is created anew” (ibid., 177); he remarks that babies speak “the language of all living creatures, cooing like a dove, gurgling like a dolphin, meowing, squawking, bawling ... The linguistic primordial soup”; he then writes out some of these sounds as words: “Dgish, anguh, pneya, eeh, deeya, bunya-bunya-bunyaba, batyabuuu” (ibid., 177); he compares her wobbling to that of a penguin. As is clear from these passages, the narrator also arrives at the chapter’s final words via a series of observations about animals, and in fact one of the main themes of the book is the relationship between animals and humans, a relationship that Gospodinov often characterizes as one of domination (hence the “melancholy Minotaur” [ibid., 14] who returns time and again, unjustly mistreated because of his bull’s head); this chapter in particular has much to say about the mistreatment of animals, beginning with a newspaper report about a bullfight, and passing through an ordinance about “reducing to a minimum animals’ suffering during slaughter” (ibid., 155) and diagrams showing where exactly to place a stun gun on a cow’s head. Another means by way of which the narrator arrives at the chapter’s end is sorrow, such as the passage concerning “the world’s sorrows, Portuguese *saudade*, Turkish *hüzün*” that I cited above, and even the ephemeral observations of his daughter are tinged with melancholy, the sadness of every parent at moments that happen once and will never return (time and again, one senses the narrator’s desire to write his observations down before they flit away); indeed, his daughter ages several years in the space of only a few paragraphs, reflecting the speed at which such precious moments recede into the past. Yet another means is chance: one of the first things the reader of this novel notices is that, far from constructing the narrative through a process of accumulation (one insight adding to another, each element of the story building on those that came before), the narrator often seems simply to write

down what he thinks at a given moment, perhaps a distant memory jarred by the previous passage, perhaps (as with the passage with which I began this paragraph) an interruption by his daughter or someone else; it is in part because of this method that the labyrinth is such an important figure throughout the novel. To demonstrate these workings of chance, it may be instructive to transcribe the chapter's final four paragraphs:

Her first steps, she's wobbling like a royal penguin. As if walking on the moon. She reaches out to grab onto the air. So concentrated and smiling to herself, so fragile. When you look at her, she falls.

While I'm writing about the world's sorrows, Portuguese *saudade*, Turkish *hüzün*, about the Swiss illness—nostalgia . . . she comes to me, at two and a half, and suddenly snatches away my pen.

Sit here and open your mouth up wide, she says. Then she gets up on tiptoe and looks inside. Wow, it's really dark inside you, I can't see a thing . . .

Come on, let's play dust motes. You're the daddy dust mote, and I'm the baby dust mote. (Ibid., 177)

While on the one hand, the final paragraph follows logically from the others (they are after all a series of recollections about the narrator's daughter), their connection is at the same time entirely arbitrary: nothing really brings them together other than the fact that they come to the narrator's mind in a certain order; something about each particular recollection (something specific to him, to the flow of his thoughts) flows from the previous one and brings about the next. As such, the paragraphs recall what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write, in a very different context, about fragmentary works: in such a work, each fragment stands utterly alone, yet in so doing is inextricably related to all the other fragments; each fragment, in other words, finds its own meaning "lessened" by the totality in which it participates, and at the same time, in standing alone, undoes or de-totalizes this totality (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 39-58). This comparison, while not quite exact, highlights the extent to which several narratives take place in the novel at any one time, threads that come together momentarily before fraying apart once more: any given passage speaks with several voices,

or tells several stories, simultaneously. This is all the more true of the chapter's final paragraph, in which, as I note above, a multitude of strands come together or "arrive"; yet as such, the paragraph is every bit as much an origin as a destination, bringing these strands together not by fusing them, but in such a way that they continue to speak with a degree of autonomy, in a kind of co-resonance; the paragraph is thus as much an opening as a closure, setting the voices that lead into it in a relation of echo: putting everything that comes before into play.

For the final paragraph concerns a game, one invented on the spot by the narrator's daughter, a game about dust motes, perhaps the smallest thing the little girl can observe or imagine (another link to the fragment: a privileging of reduction over accumulation). The game has not yet begun, as the girl first has to invite or summon her father to play, which she does with the first words of the paragraph, "come on," which translate the Bulgarian *Xaïðu* or *haide*—a translation that is entirely accurate, but far from straightforward or direct. For where the English words that come together in the phrasal verb "come on" each have meanings independent of it, the Bulgarian locution only really signifies in a situation such as that of the passage: one says *haide* to beckon another to follow, to come along, to hurry up, to make more of an effort, etc.; it is ephemeral in its very nature, its sense evaporating the moment the situation changes. Its situational nature would not prevent any Bulgarian from understanding it, yet it is not, strictly speaking, Bulgarian: while its origin is disputed, it certainly came to Bulgarian via Turkish, specifically Ottoman Turkish, just as it did to every other Balkan language (variants of it are used in all of them).<sup>4</sup> This most informal of terms (one uses it only among those with whom one is close) thus opens the chapter at the same time as it closes it, putting its entire contents into play, and this leads me back to the life of the novel, its fervor, its entrain. Certainly, it is immediate—one feels its palpitation throughout. Yet at the same time, it attains a distance of sorts, a distance in and from itself—

this is the very means by which it feels itself live. It feels itself live in an act of constant creation, for in a sense, it utters *haide* with every passage, every sentence, every paragraph, however brief, however long: at each turn, it refuses to utter a single meaning, to choose a single thread, to chart a single passage, instead choosing them all, at each instant, all at once. Each instant thereby expresses the novel's totality, yet at the same time undoes it, in a manner of speaking, by expressing it, each time, in a singular way. By convoking it: summoning the novel's various threads to echo one another in ways that shift from page to page, attaining, by this very means, a strange coherence. An openness, by way of which any meaning—any given sense—may come about at any given time, on the condition that it not repeat the already constituted, on the condition that it create itself anew, not in any grand or heroic gesture, but in the most commonplace of ways (in the simplest possible game): a constant invitation for sense to feel itself live. *Haide*.

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Goh (in his essay “The Risk of Existence”) is one of the few writers to deal with Nancy’s engagement with biopolitics. While I largely agree with Goh’s argument that biopolitics finds it difficult to conceive of chance (what Nancy calls the surprise) and hence ironically renders itself incapable of grasping “the very fact of existence” (Goh 2015: 18), I don’t entirely agree with his formulation of “the biopolitical condition” as the “reduction” of the various systems within which we exist “to the sole system of politics” (ibid., 17)—it seems to me that this describes totalitarianism more than biopolitics, as it does not take up the question of life in any essential way. In his book *Reticulations: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Networks of the Political*, Philip Armstrong (2009) also deals with the question of biopolitics, but surprisingly only as it concerns Hardt and Negri, not Nancy; see especially the fourth chapter of this book, “Being Communist.” See also Michael Turnheim’s compelling remarks, in his “Autisme, biopolitique et déconstruction,” about Nancy’s preference of the term (of his own creation) ecotechnics to biopolitics because it resists the hypothesis of a life that is “‘pure’ or ‘nude’” (Turnheim 2005: 124, my translation).

<sup>2</sup> The key text here is of course Nancy’s book *Being Singular Plural* (2000). The thinking of the singular plural allows one to avoid one of the more puerile tendencies of contemporary literary studies, which seeks to divide works (mostly from “minor” languages) into those that “speak to” their own languages and countries, and those that, in their universal or global appeal, lose all links to (and indeed betray, according to the implication) their origins. For an interesting, if implicit, treatment of this issue, see Wai-Chee Dimock’s comments on Mandelstam’s reading of Dante in her “Literature for the Planet” (2001: 179).

<sup>3</sup> To my mind, one of the most interesting aspects of Nancy’s work is its refusal to adopt a melancholy tone—its relentless optimism, one might say, with the caveat that the optimism is not for something to come, but for what is already present—even when dealing with the most agony-inducing themes. This optimism for the present is part of what animates his work, in the literal sense of giving it life.

<sup>4</sup> As such, this paragraph echoes one of my favorite passages in the novel, in which the narrator describes how his father, while visiting the narrator in Berlin, regularly visits the Turkish market to combat his homesickness: “There he could always exchange a few ‘Bulgarian’ words like *arkadaş*

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(friend), *çok selam* (many greetings), *aferim* (bravo), *mashallah* (bravo), *evallah* (bravo again) . . . and to buy himself some ‘Bulgarian’ cheese and a roll” (Gospodinov 2015: 214).